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Editorials

Editorial: Let's celebrate, emulate these education successes

By Albuquerque Journal Editorial Board

Monday, October 2nd, 2017 at 12:02am

While it's important to point out the shortcomings of public education today – and lay out a path for improvement – it's just as important to highlight things that are going right in our taxpayer-funded schools so they can be replicated. Here are three recent examples:

- Five years ago, UNM reported its four-year graduation rate – the percentage of students who graduate within four years of their initial enrollment – was a dismal 14.8 percent. This year it has nearly double that. Final figures are not yet available, but interim UNM President Chaouki Abdallah says it will be at least 29.4 percent – the highest since the early '80s, according to Terry Babbitt, UNM's vice provost of enrollment and analytics.

One key was ensuring students got more help outside the classroom. That meant revamping UNM's Center for Academic Program Support, or CAPS, which offers a wide range of services to students struggling to keep their grades – and their spirits – going in the right direction. CAPS offers workshops on basics like note-taking, college reading and time management. There's also the Writing & Language Center where students can get help drafting essays or practicing foreign languages. And the "Math MaLL," a computer-centric learning center, helps students working through entry-level math courses.

UNM has had to reallocate resources to get the best return on investment.

In addition, reforms advocated by the Gov. Susana Martinez administration, including setting a uniform number of credits for graduation, offering financial incentives to taking a full course load and graduating on time, providing clear paths early on that show what courses are needed for a degree in an area of study, and more high school dual-credit courses played a major role. Then-UNM President Robert Frank embraced the state's initiatives and implemented or beefed up many of the programs Abdallah is continuing today.

Congratulations to all involved in helping more New Mexicans get their degrees in a timely fashion – boosting the state's brain bank and saving these graduates thousands of dollars in education costs.

- Until last Sunday's front-page story about the Albuquerque Institute of Math and Science (AIMS), precious few knew that the state-chartered school is one of the most successful sixth- through 12th-grade high schools in the nation – and the world.

AIMS has been rated among America's top high schools by the Washington Post, Newsweek and U.S. News and World Report. In 2015, AIMS students on average ranked higher than the U.S. average score in both math and reading literacy, according to recently released data. They also had a higher average than Switzerland, Sweden, Korea and every other country that took the PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) test. In layman's terms, that's a test taken by 15-year-olds in dozens of industrialized countries. Each school's scores are measured against national averages.

It's little wonder that AIMS, which has about 360 students selected by lottery, has an enrollment waiting list of 1,800 kids. Principal Kathy Sandoval-Snider and her staff deserve congratulations – and emulation by other schools and teachers.

- In February 2016, only 71 percent of UNM Law School graduates passed the state bar exam on their first try. Five months later, that fell to 68 percent. Two years ago, the pass rate had been 81 percent. Recognizing something was amiss – and knowing exam passage rates are important to prospective law students – administrators created a panel to assess the downward trend and quickly came up with a plan of action. The Law School started a new course to help prepare students for the bar exam, identified ways to weave exam-relevant material into law classes and invited bar exam graders to campus for workshops. UNM even helped students cramming for the bar exam with things like child care.

The strategies worked: 91 percent of students who took the bar exam for the first time – the first time – in July passed.

The impressive improvement speaks highly of UNM, its Law School, and the faculty, staff and “friends” of the law school who stepped up to reverse the trend – in record time. They, too, have put together some results-driven best practices that should be replicated.

Each of the above accomplishments required good data, good tracking of that data, innovative approaches and a willingness by administrators, teachers and students to try new things.

The results speak for themselves.

This editorial first appeared in the Albuquerque Journal. It was written by members of the editorial board and is unsigned as it represents the opinion of the newspaper rather than the writers.